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ABSTRACT

Family conflict over rights and responsibilities may result from horizontal and vertical decalage in members' development of moral reasoning abilities. The terms horizontal and vertical decalage refer to phenomena of uneven individual development within and across stages of moral reasoning. Because moral conflict involves competing claims, the principle necessary for resolution is justice, of which equality and reciprocity are two components. What these components mean depends on the cognitive, ego development, and social perspective levels an individual attains. But even if family members' moral reasoning abilities vary widely, moral conflict can be justly resolved. To better understand moral conflicts in the family, the concept of "family decalage," or uneven cognitive development among family members, is useful. According to scoring methods used in early research, standardized on males, females were found to receive scores lower than men on moral development. However, recent studies have indicated that differences between males' and females' perceptions of justice may account for these findings. When such differences are taken into account, women achieve developmental levels in moral reasoning equivalent to those of men. More generally, it is evident that research on sex-role attitudes, preferences, and behavior has excluded measures of moral reasoning development. Uneven learning in all the content areas of sex roles should be considered in future studies within this area of research. (RH)

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FAMILY DECALAGE:

UNDERSTANDING MORAL CONFLICT

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I. Introduction

   A. Family Conflicts in the Moral Realm
   B. Moral Reasoning Development in Family Studies

II. Family Decalage

   A. Horizontal and Vertical Decalage
   B. Moral Conflict and Family Decalage

III. Factors in Moral Reasoning Development

   A. Antecedents of Moral Reasoning Development
   B. Decalage in Moral Reasoning Development

IV. Sex Roles and Moral Reasoning Development

   A. Women's Experiences and the Ethic of Care
   B. Research on Sex Roles

V. Child and Family Studies

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Abstract

Most family conflicts concern rights and responsibilities, yet moral reasoning development is rarely used in family research. Family decalage, the uneven progress in stage development, may be one way to explain how moral conflict occurs. When family members are at different stages of moral development, there will be greater difficulty in resolving conflict. It was proposed that family studies programs include life-span development, particularly moral reasoning development, to augment exchange theory in the explanation of conflict about sex roles. Gilligan's theory of care and responsibility was suggested as a new approach to the combining of child and family studies.

Introduction

Most decisions are not moral decisions. Only those that involve judgments about the rights of people or the justice in the consequences are moral decisions. Two general grounds of a right are equality and reciprocity. The ultimate level of moral development, then, is the ability to make decisions that would be equally just even if each person could exchange places.

Family Conflicts in the Moral Realm

Family conflicts are not moral issues unless they involve rights and responsibilities between people. The moral issue is not who washes dishes or who cuts the grass; the moral issue is in how it is decided. How you do it is not a moral issue, either, but someone's expecting you to do it as your role or someone's pushing you to do it <u>now</u> when later is equally as good can become a moral issue.

Moral conflict in families is the head-on collision between rights, between obligations, or between rights and obligations; parents' obligation to provide for their children against parents' obligation to provide for themselves; husbands' rights to spend time in career advancement against their right to spend time in their family advancement; or children's obligation to take care of their personal selves against their obligation to take care of younger siblings. These are the inevitable family dilemmas.

Moral Reasoning Development in Family Studies

Almost no research in family relationships includes a measure of moral reasoning development, yet the variables studied are marital quality, sex-role orientation, power, family violence, and similar areas of rights and responsibilities. One reason that moral reasoning development may not be a part of family studies is that the professional areas of child development and family relations draw from two different research methodologies. Ordinarily child development is the study of intrapersonal development with interaction as the antecedent, whereas family relations is the study of the result of interaction on something outside the person.

The proposal in this paper is that the study of the family would profit from the inclusion of a knowledge of moral reasoning development. Family conflict about rights and responsibilities may be the result of differing levels of moral reasoning. Further, the conflict may be the result of horizontal decalage or vertical decalage, the uneven development within and across moral reasoning stages.

Family Decalage

People develop to higher stages of moral reasoning at their own individual pace and not all people reach the same level. Families have a diversity of ages, a variety of experiences, and constant change. Uneven development is the norm. Family decalage is a term coined to explain this unevenness.

Horizontal and Vertical Decalage

Stage development is characterized by a qualitative change in behavior and not by merely adding on another behavior. Other than physical development, the stages are cognitive. Stages are also assumed to be invariant in sequence and irreversible once achieved. Walter Emmerich pointed out in 1968 that the differences between people in stage development is in the rate of progression in moving through the sequence and in the final level they reach. Couple this difference with the more refined difference that decalage can show.

Jean Piaget (1963) recognized that people can develop a cognitive stage structure on one level without having to experience its use in all concepts or in all situations. Moreover, a person can move to the next higher cognitive stage withouthaving experienced the use of the present stage structure in all concepts. The partial experience within one stage is called horizontal decalage. The stepwise or staggered development into the higher cognitive stage in some but not all concepts is called vertical decalage.

A person can be able to think in abstract terms in the highest cognitive level in the area of mathematics while having to operate on a concrete level in the area of role behavior. That is, having reached a high cognitive level in one area is not automatically transferred to all other areas. Piaget emphasized that interaction with the environment

is essential for development. It is a new learning every time a person meets a new situation in which the new stage can be used. If a particular situation is never encountered, then a gap in learning is there.

Moral Conflict and Family Decalage

Conflict over rights and responsibilities may be a matter of horizontal and vertical decalage. Even when two people look at a dilemma from the same level of moral reasoning, there may be difficulty in resolution. Just as concepts of weight, size, and volume must be learned separately in the concrete operations stage of cognitive development, the concepts of equity, human dignity, and self-respect must be learned separately in each level of moral reasoning development (Kohlberg, 1982).

Even when all family members are capable of higher levels of moral reasoning in some concepts, their understanding and application of certain concepts may differ drastically. Therefore, each sees the dilemma as an entirely different problem. A husband whose role outside the family requires him to make decisions based on "good group consequences" may make decisions at home based on "good individual consequences" which could be a lower level. He might not understand that there has been any difference in his approach to the two situations.

When people first reach a higher level of moral reasoning development, they continue to use the lower levels in some

situations. When the level of moral reasoning seems to be able to assimilate the problem at hand, the person is said to experience equilibrium. However, when the problems do not seem to have satisfactory solutions by using the present cognitive structure of moral reasoning, the person is in a a state of disequilibrium. This cognitive disequilibrium may be one explanation for the inability of varying family members to settle problems about rights and responsibilities.

Another proposal in this paper is that family members do not have to be at the same level of moral reasoning development. for justice to be the consequence of a moral issue. So long as one or more family members who hold some type of power, as Raven, Centers, and Rodrigues described in 1975, understands what level of moral reasoning is being used by others, there is a higher likelihood of justice in the solution. Those persons would also have to be operating from a level based on the principle of equity.

Factors in Moral Reasoning Development

The cognitive theory of moral reasoning development was advanced by Lawrence Kohlberg (1982) who realized that moral decisions cannot be made without using other aspects of development. His theory includes a unique combination of Piaget's (1963) Cognitive Theory, Mead's (1934) Social Self Theory, Loevinger's (1976) Ego Development Theory, Selman's (1980) Social Perspective Theory, and Rawl's (1971) Theory of Justice.

Antecedents of Moral Reasoning Development

The three levels of moral reasoning are based on one's relationship to the conventions of society, that is, the rules that the group has agreed upon to deal with rights and responsibilities. Level one moral reasoning level is called preconventional because people at this level are concerned with self preservation. Level two is called conventional because people here are concerned with maintaining the rules. Level three, the highest level, is called post-conventional, not because it is beyond society but because it is concerned with the basis on which the rules are made.

The four antecedents of moral reasoning development are cognitive development, social perspective development, ego development, and justice concept development. Table 1 shows these antecedents in relation to moral reasoning development.

People cannot deal with concepts of justice as a basis for challenging existing rules or making new rules or judgments if they have not reached the logical operations stage of cognitive development (Piaget, 1963). Therefore, it cannot be expected that all people in a family can make equitable decisions. However, since moral reasoning concepts have to be experienced in a moral dilemma for adequate learning to occur, there is also the situation in which a person operates on a high cognitive level in another area but on a low level of moral reasoning.

Cognitive development, then is necessary but not sufficient for moral reasoning development.

Another antecedent to reaching higher levels of moral reasoning development is ego development. Three basic levels of ego development are impulsive (serving the self), conformist (serving the group), and autonomous (taking responsibility for the consequences of one's decisions) (Loevinger, 1976). Ego development involves cognition or conscious choices. Kohlberg (1982) assumes that people can choose not to operate on a higher level of moral reasoning if they do not have the ego strength to hold to their beliefs about equity in face of powerful opponents. Ego development is necessary but not sufficient for moral reasoning development.

Social perspective taking (Mead, 1934; Selman, 1980) is the ability to take the perspective or role of others. The more people know the expectations of all roles and the more they are able to look at situations from others' perspectives, the more likely they can operate from the postconventional level of moral reasoning. The three basic levels are subjective, reciprocal/mutual, and societal (Selman, 1980). Again, the person must have reached the societal level in social perspective taking, the logical operations level of cognitive development, and the autonomous level of ego development in order to understand and make equitable decisions in face of moral conflict.

Since a moral conflict is a conflict between competing claims of people, the principle one must use to resolve them is justice. Equality and reciprocity are two components of justice, and they are used in accordance with one's cognitive level, one's ego development level, and one's social perspective level. Justice levels are the essence of Kohlberg's (1982) three levels of moral reasoning development. Level one is obedience and fair exchange. Level two is concern for others and welfare of the group. Level three is upholding basic rights and legal contracts of the society. The description of the highest level in each of the four antecedents involves an impartiality rather an egocentricism. Rawls (1971) would claim that the higher levels are better because they embody justice, the universal principle of human relationships.

Decalage in Moral Reasoning Development

Stages in development are the cognitive structures through which all content is assimilated. Content includes the concepts one encounters in dealing with moral dilemmas. Concepts which are in the moral realm are issues of life, law, punishment, conscience, authority, property, truth, affiliation, and contract. Concepts are also such principles as having a right or duty, retributing or exonerating, serving human dignity and autonomy, maintaining equity, and upholding self-respect. These concepts are not tied only to one moral reasoning level, therefore, one could be used differently according to the moral level. Thus,

a person could be operating on a postconventional level in the concept of retributing and only on the conventional level in the concept of upholding self-respect. This would be an illustration of vertical decalage. When a person has experienced some but not all of the concepts in one moral reasoning level, it would be called horizontal decalage.

A family member may believe in retribution on a pre-conventional level which would give an equal exchange for services rendered. The reason would be that it is right to meet one's own needs and others should do the same. Retribution on the conventional level would be understood as a rule for the welfare of the group and would thus be carried out. Retribution on the post-conventional level would be based on the basic human right of people to be treated fairly. The problem in a family when members are operating from different moral structures (levels) on the same content (retribution) is that there may not be agreement on the equity of the exchange.

Only claims of retribution that are reversible are valid; an individual who transgresses the rights of others has no right to having his or her own rights respected; and the greatest good for the greatest number is necessary for survival of society are three principles on which post-conventional moral decisions are made. A wife who makes the conscious decision to follow traditional expectations of the dual role of homemaker and employed person may be operating from any one of the three moral levels.

If she decides to do both to be the good wife who looks after her family in any way she can, she is said to be operating on a conventional level. If her husband agrees with her and praises her for doing what she perceived as as her role because he, too, believed that husbands and wives should do what they can for their families, then they both would be in accord.

If, however, her husband agrees with her behavior but sees it as an equal exchange for what she is receiving from the privilege of being a wife and mother, she would resent his agreement. If her husband agrees with her behavior because he sees the behavior as resulting in the greatest good for the greatest number, she would again resent his agreement. The resentment would come from the conflict in their beliefs about her rights and her responsibilities, not about her behavior. The family decalage is the framework for understanding these moral conflicts.

Sex Roles and Moral Reasoning Development

The examples in this paper have been discussed from the moral reasoning theory of Kohlberg (1982) who standardized the levels and the scoring manual (Colby, et al., 1982) by research on males. When females are scored by Kohlberg's method, they tend to receive a lower score. Carol Gilligan (1982) began to study the responses of females and found that equally as high level of moral reasoning was exhibited; the difference was that

females saw justice through preserving relationships, through care and responsibility, and through non-violence. On the other hand, males saw justice through rights, equality, and taking a stand. From this new insight in women's responses, Gilligan produced an Ethic of Care based on women's experiences in their sex roles.

Women's Experiences and the Ethic of Care

Women's moral strength has come from their concern with relationships and responsibilities, but in a male world of competitiveness such concern was devalued. Even when women knew the inequity of decisions they and others made, they most often did not express such knowledge because of their vulnerability in a world without sufficient power. Gilligan (1982) chose to study women's decisions in an area that only they could decide—abortion. From this study she developed the Ethic of Care with three basic levels (see Table 2).

The first level focuses on care of self for survival. Advancing is seen in a transition stage when care of self is recognized as selfish. The second level goes beyond self but the behavior and belief is centered on care of others. This is the conventional level since it is the legitimized cultural expectation that women will stand by and support others. There is moral reasoning growth in a transition stage when care of others is seen as self sacrifice. It is probably hard for the reader to accept that seeing care of others is a lower moral

reasoning stage than seeing it as self sacrifice. This transition leads to the third and highest level, care of self and others equally.

The Ethic of Care also has as its antecedents the necessary cognitive level, the adequate level of ego development, and perspective taking beyond the person. The challenge to researchers is to test males in the levels of care and responsibility for a theory of moral reasoning development based on all humans.

Research on Sex Roles

Research on sex roles peaked in the 1970s and was mainly concerned with sex-role preferences (Scanzoni and Fox, 1980). Decision-making about sex-role preferences seemed to be explained from an exchange theory perspective. Although equity appeared to be the guiding principle in a fair exchange, none of the research reviewed included any measure of moral reasoning development. Even though the research indicated that women should change more toward the male view of primacy of the individual over the primacy of the group, it was not clear whether the underlying moral reasoning structure was Kohlberg's (1982) level one concept of exchange or level three concept of justice.

Since ego development is related to moral reasoning development, one study showing that post-conformist couples interact beyond sex-role stereotypes and cope with marriage problems better may be an indication of moral reasoning as

an explanation for sex-role attitudes, preferences, and behavior (Swensen, et al., 1981). Horizontal decalage, uneven learning in all the content areas of sex roles, also needs to be considered. The person who has never explored the limits of content in one moral stage is more likely to accept outside authority rather than a more adequate logic. The greater the learning across content in a lower moral level, the more likely the person is to see the inadequacy of that level; therefore the acceleration to a higher stage is more probable. In addition, if a person has moved vertically in moral reasoning levels in some content areas but has remained on an egocentric level in other content areas, that person is more likely to regress under stress. These predictions were made by Kohlberg (1982) and merit consideration in the study of sex roles.

Child and Family Studies

There is a new child and family professional coming from departments in which the students are required to take courses in theories of human development and in theories of family interaction. No longer will departments be staffed with only sociologists and psychologists who look at the same subjects and same data set and reach different conclusions. The life-span theorists may give the lead in studying child development, adult development, and family relationships. Hill and Mattessich (1979) showed how family development theory and life-span development may be jointly viewed.

Table 1

Antecedents to Moral Reasoning Development

	Preconventional	Conventional	Postconventional
Cognitive Development (Piaget,1963)	Preoperational and Concrete Operations	Concrete Operations	Logical Operations
Ego Development (Loevinger,1976)	Impulsive	Conformist	Autonomous
Social Perspective Development (Selman,1980)	Subjective	Reciprocal Mutual	Societal
Justice Development (Kohlberg,1982; Rawls,1971)	Obedience and Fair Exchange	Concern for Others and Welfare of the Group	Basic Rights and Contracts

Table 2

Ethic of Care

Level One	Care of Self
	To ensure survival
Transition	Criticism of concern for self as selfishness
	Disequilibrium with care of self as guiding structure for all dilemmas
Level Two	Care of Others
	To care for the dependent and unequal
	Equated with feminine goodness
Transition	Criticism of care of others as legitimized role as self sacrifice
	Exclusion of self recognized as inequity
	Disequilibrium with care of others as guiding structure for all dilemmas
Level Three	Care of Self and Others
	Self and other seen as interdependent
	Responsibility for choice to care for self along with care for others
	Recognition that care is a principle equal to justice

(Gilligan, 1982)

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